DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 592 CS 508 239

AUTHOR Thomsen, Steven R.
TITLE A Worm in the Apple: Hollywood's Influence on the Public's Perception of Teachers.
PUB DATE 15 Apr 93
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Southern States Communication Association and the Central States Communication Association (Lexington, KY, April 14-18, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Attitudes; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Fantasy; *Films; Higher Education; Mass Media Role; Popular Culture; Public Schools; Secondary Education; Secondary School Teachers; Teacher Stereotypes; *Teaching (Occupation); Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS Fantasy Theme Analysis; Opinion Polls

ABSTRACT

A study compared the portrayal of teachers in a sample selection of American movies with recent trends in the public perception and opinion of teachers, education, and the nation's public schools. E. G. Bormann's fantasy theme analysis was used to examine themes and myths developed in "Goodby Mr. Chips," "The Corn Is Green," "Blackboard Jungle," "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie," "To Sir with Love," "Teachers," "Dead Poets Society," "Summer School," "Lean on Me," and "Stand and Deliver." The most frequent fantasy type in these films was "good versus evil," where the "good" teacher challenges the "evil"--other teachers and administrators. These "great teachers" are atypical--typical teachers in this myth are far from competent. A number of benchmark trends (based on the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa polls conducted annually from 1969 to 1990) indicated that public perceptions of schools, teachers, and the teaching profession became increasingly less positive through the 1980s. Since it is difficult to make a causal link between the fantasy themes of the movies and the parallel trends in public opinion, cultivation theory and symbolic convergence theory offer a potential explication with at least face validity. Both theories suggest that repeated exposure to the myths and themes of the movies on teachers and teaching should influence an individual's perceptions of teachers and school systems. Hollywood's influence has functioned as a worm in the apple--the fantasy myths in the movies analyzed closely parallel public perceptions. (Contains 54 references.) (RS)

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A Worm In The Apple:

Hollywood's Influence On The Public's Perception of Teachers

Steven R. Thomsen
Department of Journalism
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
(317) 285-8222
03srthomsen@bsuvc.bsu.edu
03srthomsen@bsuvax1 (bitnet)

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A paper presented at the Southern States Communication Association and Central States Communication Association joint annual meeting, Lexington, KY, April 15, 1993

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Abstract

Using Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis, this paper examines the fantasy themes and myths that emerge from several American films about teachers and public schools and compares them with trends in American public opinion on teachers, educational issues, and public schools, as reported by the annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa polls. Symbolic convergence theory and cultivation theory are used to offer a possible explanation for the similarities between movie "myths" and opinion trends.

Introduction

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued the now-famous "Nation at Risk (1983)" report, sending shock waves through the educational infrastructure of the United States and placing the need to improve our country's schools high on the national agenda. Among other things, the report's stinging rhetoric complained that insufficient numbers of academically able students were being attracted to teaching, noting that "too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students (p. 22)."

The report also lamented inadequate teacher training programs, unacceptable working conditions, poor salaries that forced many teachers to take second or summer jobs, and lack of autonomy in curriculum decisions. "A Nation at Risk" also warned of "serious" teacher shortages in key fields and claimed that "half of the newly employed mathematics, science and English teachers are not qualified to teach these subjects; fewer than one-third of U.S. high schools offer physics taught by qualified teachers (p. 23)."

In the "Nation at Risk" report, as well as other reports issued at about the same time, teachers were forced to bear the burden for the decline in the quality of public schools. "The American Teacher," also proclaimed that same year that "never before in U.S. history has the caliber of those entering the teaching profession been as low as it is today (Feistritzer, 1983)."

The following year, the film, "Teachers (1984)," was released. In this film, actor Nick Nolte plays a burned-out high school social studies teacher fighting the superintendent, school administrators, delinquent students, campus violence, and his own disinterest for a profession at which he had once excelled.

In the opening scene, a teacher is beaten, another teacher is bitten on the hand by a crazed student, a student is stabbed and forced to sit bleeding in the school office, and the audience is informed that the school is being sued by a former student who graduated without learning to read.

In an exchange between the school secretary and the vice principal, the audience gets a prelude of what is to come. As the secretary explains that "at least 10 percent of our teachers absent again today and we're having a hard time finding substitutes," the vice principal responds, "scrape the bottom of the barrel if you have to." It turns out that by shear accident, the secretary hires a substitute who turns out to be an outpatient at a nearby mental hospital. Ironically, the substitute is portrayed as the most creative, and possibly the most "normal" teacher, at the school.

That same year, the annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll (Elam, 1989) reported that 64 percent of its respondents gave the nation's public schools a grade of "C" or lower and 41 percent gave the nation's teachers a grade of "C" or lower. "Difficulty in finding good teachers" ranked fourth as the "biggest problem" faced by respondents local schools. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents said they would not want their daughter to become a teacher and 42 percent said they would not want their son to become a teacher (Elam, 1989).

Could each of these events have influenced the others? Could there be a connection between the portrayal of teachers in the mass media and popular public opinion on teachers and the teaching profession? A number communication scholars have suggested that the media plays a role in shaping the social reality of media users (Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987; Hawkins & Pingree, 1982; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli 1980; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Bormann, 1982a). In some cases, the media may simply reinforce existing beliefs and in other cases it may serve as a catalyst to strengthen the myths that symbolically shape the constructed world of media users (Hawkins, Pingree, Adler, 1987; Bormann 1982a, 1982b; Charters, 1966; Roberts & Schramm, 1971). Heilman (1991), in fact, has suggested that the mass media may have propagated what he calls the "great teacher myth"--that the "great teacher" must have a completely unorthodox style and must constantly go to battle against the "evil" education system.

This article will examine the "great teacher myth" by comparing how teachers have been portrayed in a sample selection of American movies with recent trends in the public perception and opinion of teachers, education, and our nation's public schools. Bormann's (1972, 1982a) fantasy

theme analysis will be used to examine themes and myths developed in the movies. Public opinion trends will be based on the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa polls conducted from 1969 to 1990. Gerbner's (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) cultivation hypothesis and Bormann's (1972) symbolic convergence theory will be used to provide potential explications for the relationship between trends in teacher characterization and public opinion.

Fantasy Theme Analysis

In his 1982 essay, Ernest Bormann (1982a) asked whether a skillful communicator could "design dramatizing messages with an eye to a target audience and deliver those messages in such a way that others were brought into participation in the fantasy (p. 291)?" By participating, the audience would become a part of a rhetorical, myth-making vision resulting in a new realm of reality, a psychodramatic fantasy world that may even seem more real than the real world (Bales, 1950; Bormann, 1982a; Smith, 1988).

Bormann's contention was that rhetors, including the mass media, use dramatic techniques to tell their stories and within these dramatic styles are "fantasy themes." A fantasy theme is essentially a myth, or a story about a particular incident which is presented as containing or suggesting a general truth that transcends the basic story, much like a biblical parable (Sykes, 1970; Smith, 1988). Frequently characters are portrayed as heroes and villains to symbolize the message or theme of the discourse (Smith, 1988). These symbolic confrontations can be classified as "fantasy types," with "good versus evil" being the most common. Smith (1988) defines a fantasy type as a "group of fantasy themes so closely related that they constitute a general thematic class." Other types can include overcoming oppression, restoration, or truth holding up against all challenges.

Users of media, or participants in the discourse situation, Bormann contends, become drawn away from the "here and now" and into the fantasy myth, making them a part of the "rhetorical vision." The shared myth, in effect, becomes a part of the users new symbolic reality

or vision of how the world really is (Bormann, 1972, 1982a; Littlejohn, 1989). Individuals who share the rhetorical vision become a part of a "rhetorical community," a form of "public" which participates in the drama (Bormann, 1982b). As Bormann explains:

> The fantasy theme drama when shared is a key to the social reality. It is not by itself the social reality. My position is that during the process of sharing a fantasy theme drama the participants come to share the interpretation of the drama,the emotions, meanings, and attitudes of the drama towards the personae and the action. They come to share a common view of an aspect of their common experience. To my mind this is a good definition for social reality (1982a, p. 304).

The critic's purpose in fantasy theme approach is to provide a descriptive analysis and interpretation of the myth-making activities in a narrative. This is accomplished by identifying fantasy themes and fantasy types and by examining the dramatic motives or purpose of the actors in the discourse (Smith, 1988).

Hollywood and the "Great-Teacher" Myth

Perhaps one of the most common fantasy types found in movies about teachers is "good versus evil," where the teacher is seen as a protagonist fighting against the "evils" of the world. Sometimes, the teacher may simply be pitted against the challenges of the profession. In the 1939 film, "Goodbye, Mr. Chips," the theme is that of teachers as benevolent, sympathetic guardians of culture, truth and knowledge. The shy Mr. Chipping has to overcome his own personal doubts and learn to control the unruly students that have been assigned to him in first year as a teacher. It is through his perseverance that he finally gains the friendship and admiration of students and teachers at his all-boy school. The myth is that of a teacher as a noble character who can survive all challenges and doubts. This becomes apparent in a conversation between a young Mr. Chipping and the school's sage headmaster, who offers the following advice:

> Our profession is not an easy one. It calls for something more than an university

> degree. Our business is to mold men. It demands character and courage. Above all, it demands the ability to exercise authority. Any young man should ask himself seriously if he has not mistaken his vocation. When a man is young there are many walks of life open to him.

In the 1945 film, "The Corn is Green," the same fantasy themes and types can be found. Bette Davis plays the character of Miss Moffat, a well educated, head-strong English woman who inherits the family estate in a Welsh coal mining town. Upon learning that only one person in the town can read and write, Miss Moffat proposes that a school be established. Her proposal is met with opposition from the town squire and other leaders and soon a confrontation is set up as cultures clash over the need for education. Miss Moffat responds by establishing the school in her home. It becomes a popular haven for the young seeking to learn.

Moffat discovers that one young man has a gift for writing and he soon becomes her "project." The boy, Morgan, finds himself in a difficult position as his new knowledge isolates him from his former friends and his Welsh background keeps him from feeling a part of his English teachers. "Evil" is also introduced in the form of a teen-age daughter of one of Miss Moffat's assistants. The girl hates school, her mother, and especially Miss Moffat. She tricks the young man into a tryst and she becomes pregnant. She is sent away before the young man learns of the girl's pregnancy and Miss Moffat willingly pays "hush" money to keep the girl away. Miss Moffat's desire is to get the young man a scholarship to Oxford. In her role as teacher, guardian, protectorate, she will do anything to accomplish her goal. Miss Moffat tells her student that she has "in the middle of the night laid awake making plans...making plans for you."

In many ways, the fantasy theme is that of the myth of a teacher and of education as the great social equalizer and liberator. These themes become apparent during the conversation between Miss Moffat and her student as he arrives home from his interview at Oxford. Morgan explains:

> I have come back from the world. Since the day I was born I have been a prisoner

behind a stone wall. And now someone has given me a leg up to see the other side. They cannot drag me back again, they cannot. They must give me a push and send me over.

When Morgan learn that the girl is pregnant, he tells Miss Moffat that he must give up his scholarship. She again assumes her role of liberator, decides to adopt the child, and uses her best persuasion to encourage her student to hold to his dream. "I'm giving you that push over the wall you asked for," she explains.

In the 1955 film, "Blackboard Jungle," the fantasy type continues to be "good versus evil," but the "evil" now comes from an internal source. It is no longer educational outsiders, but rather the opposition comes in the form of other teachers, administrators and mean-spirited students themselves. Unlike previous movies, both the protagonist and the antagonists are educators or students. This film sets an interesting pattern of fantasy themes and types to be copied in later films including "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1968)," "To Sir With Love (1967)," "Teachers (1984)," "Dead Poets Society (1989)," "Summer School (1989)," "Lean on Me (1988)," and "Stand and Deliver (1988)." In the new version of this fantasy type, we see one teacher who must stand against the incompetencies or evils of other teachers and the system itself. The myth is that of the good teacher as the outcast, the maverick, the troublemaker, the saint in black. But another fantasy myth is also created--that of the typical teacher as incompetent or incapable and that of the administrator as callous, uncaring and self-serving.

In the "Blackboard Jungle," Glenn Ford portrays Mr. Dadier, a first-year teacher in a tough and gritty urban school where the students have the teachers cowering in fear. In one particular scene, Mr. Dadier walks in on a discussion between a group of teachers in the faculty lounge. He listens to their complaints and then runs through a litany of criticisms which become the "myths" or "themes" that have been used again and again in more recent films:

Teacher #1: ...Tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to rig up an electric chair and bring it to my carpentry class. I'm going to tell my

pupils it's a circuit tester and I'm going to lead the little lice into the chair one by one and throw the switch on them.

Teacher #2: Those kids will rig up that hot seat first, throw you into it, and fry you to death...

Teacher #3: I would've clobbered them...

Mr. Dadier: Would you? They outnumber you, outweigh you, and outreach you. Besides, they get clobbered at home and in the streets...

Teacher #1: That's why they understand it...

Mr. Dadier: But what's that got to do with teaching?

Female Teacher: I never have any trouble...not real trouble.

Mr. Dadier: That's right Miss Pannuchi. He's a clobberer. Your a slobberer. "I'm just a nice woman trying to do my job, now please be nice boys."

You (Dadier turns to a make teacher). And you. You give them the the veteran pitch. "I've got the Purple Heart, boys." Or you tell them about...what is it..that steel plate in your head. Or that artificial leg. You beg for sympathy. "Look, I'm a veteran, fellas, will you help me keep my job?" Do you care if they learn anything? No. This guy's lucky if he doesn't get his leg kicked out from underneath him.

And you (turning to a third teacher). You're a slumberer. You sleep walk. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. OK, I mean every once in a while you make sounds like a teacher. Nobody cares. Nobody listens. Nobody cares. Especially you.

And here (turning to a fourth teacher). He's a grumbler. You hate the kids. You have contempt for them. You condemn them....

Teacher #5: All right. What about you, Zola?

Mr. Dadier: I'm...I...I'm a fumbler. I'm not doing any better than the rest of you.

Teacher #5: Well, what are we supposed to do? Try butting our heads against a stone wall for a bunch of kids that don't want to learn in the the first place?

Mr. Dadier: Yes.

Teacher #5: All right, how?

Mr. Dadier: I don't know how. There must be some way to try to reach them.

Teacher #5: Whom are you trying to convince? Me or you?

Teachers are no longer portrayed as benevolent guardians and liberators, but rather as impotent, incompetent fumblers, grumblers and bumblers unconcerned with whether their students learn. Mr. Dadier, in the role of the protagonist, is characterized as atypical--the "good' who must fight against the greater "evil." In the movie, "To Sir, With Love," produced only a few years later, Sydney Portier takes on the same role--a teacher forced to stand up against apathetic teachers and students.

In the 1968 film, "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie," Maggie Smith plays the role of Jean Brodie, a middle-aged girls school teacher whose unorthodox approach earns a cult-like following from her pupils and the disdain of the administration. Her unwillingness to follow policy and the rumors of her adulterous liaisons with two other male teachers pit her against school administrators who try to force her resignation. In a heated confrontation with the head mistress, she proclaims:

> I am a teacher, first, last and always. Do you imagine for one instance I will allow that to be taken from me without a fight. I have dedicated and sacrificed my life to this profession.

Despite her proclamation of commitment to the profession, her character differs from those of the teachers in the earlier films. Unlike Mr. Dadier, she does not seem to possess the same noble

character. She encourages one of her girls to become the mistress of the art teacher and her romantic descriptions of the revolution in Spain (the film is set in England in 1932) encourages one of her students to run away to Spain to fight. The student, however, is killed en route. Angered over the death of a classmate, another of Brodie's former students turns against her and provides the administration with the evidence to force Brodie's resignation.

Jean Brodie is characterized as a vain manipulator who takes advantage of her position as a teacher. At one point, she proclaims, "Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she is mine for life." As she confronts the head mistress a final time, she insists that "my students are loyal; they are behind me." Upon realizing that she has lost her following and has been turned in by one of her own, she finally laments, "I recognize that I am past my prime."

In "Teachers," Nolte's character, Mr. Durrell, plays out the "good versus evil" fantasy type, but the myth of teacher as incompetent, bumbling and burned-out is perpetuated. Nolte's character is less than a role model--his drinking interferes with his ability to function at school, he devotes a class period to "radiator repair," and his slovenly appearance add to the outlaw against the system myth. Once he was the teacher of the year, he started a reading program, a free school, and stood up for student rights. Now, he tells his friend that he's "tired of the bull shit" and wants to quit.

But his character is not all bad. He is able to reach a student who needs his help to learn to read. When he encourages the student to express himself via photography, however, potentially embarrassing pictures end up in the school paper. The photographs, example, show at least one teacher asleep at his desk during class. His willingness to stand up for the student earns him a heated confrontation with the vice principal, a former friend:

Vice Principal: Where the hell are your brains? Do you know how much embarrassment this is going to cause us?

Durrell: Oh come on, Roger. It's not like the kid was chewing bubblegum or something. Look, this was first time I've gotten to the kid.

Maybe I can make him give a shit about himself. That's a hell of a lot more important than a silly thing like this.

Vice Principal : That's not your job. So don't go pulling that "Mr. Chips" crap with me. Your job is to get him through the school and keep him out of trouble. That's all.

Durrell: Maybe I should re-examine my job.

Vice Principal: Maybe you should.

Most of the film is devoted to Nolte's confrontation with school administration. Despite the roughness and imperfections in his character, he refuses to lie protect the school in its lawsuit with the former student who graduated without learning to read. Near the end of the movie, he finally packs his personal possessions from his desk and proclaims, "I'm out. I'm through fighting. I can't make a difference." In the end, however, he changes his mind and decides to stay and fight. When told he is crazy to do so, he responds, "That's right. I'm a teacher."

It is ironic that his vice principal would tell him not to "go pulling that 'Mr. Chips' crap." In a sense this statement serves as a reminder of how far the fantasy themes and myths have evolved from the earlier films. The teacher is no longer an upstanding, guardian of truth, but instead a new myth is influencing the realm of reality, that of a somewhat amoral crusader whose competence and commitment can sometimes be questioned. An additional myth has evolved, that of the school as a violent atmosphere where the students have the greatest amount of control. Two other films that appeared at about the same time help to illustrate this point. In "Class of 1984" and "The Principal," Perry King and James Belushi, respectively, are hunted by bloodthirsty bands of hoodlum students.

The bumbling, incompetent teacher myth is probably no more apparent than in the 1989 film, "Summer School." Mark Harmon's character, Freddy Shoop, is an Hawaiian-shirt-wearing former surfer turned physical education instructor. Shoop, however, is pressed into summer school duty and asked to teach a remedial English course by a desperate vice principal. Shoop's

response to the request reinforces the myth:

> Look, I ain't no English teacher. See, double negative. I hand out basketballs and check for jock straps. I'm like real challenged. The only reason I got into this teaching gig was to get my summers off.

The vice principal's response gives an insight into an additional myth that surfaced in other late-1980s films, "Lean on Me" and "Stand and Deliver." The vice principal explains to Shoop, "That's OK. These are real students. They're unmotivated, irresponsible, not too bright. They relate to you." "Summer School," "Lean on Me," and "Stand and Deliver" develop the idea that administrators and teachers view their students as animalistic and incapable of learning. One common thread in these is the "good versus evil" fantasy type in which the lead characters are forced to stand against the system. Like Nick Nolte's character in "Teachers," Harmon's Freddy Shoop eventually sees the light and tries to become a model teacher. His goal is to help the students pass their English skills test. Of course, if they don't the vice principal has threatened to ruin Shoop's teaching career. Shoop cuts a deal with the students--they will try to learn if he grants their "wishes." These wishes include a party at his home and an in-class screening of the film, "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre." Nonetheless, he tells a teaching colleague, "I've been handing out assignments and the kids have been turning them back in. It's almost like school."

In "Lean on Me," which is based on a true story, a new principal becomes a militant leader who cleans up a school that is plagued with violence and filth. His style divides the faculty, but he is effective nonetheless. The principal, Joe Clarke, however, has to fight the school board, the superintendent's office, and the mayor in the process. The theme that even the best teachers have an uphill climb against the system was also a part of the rhetorical vision of "Stand and Deliver." This 1988 film tells the real-life story of Jaime Escalante who leaves his job as an engineer to become a math teacher in an East Los Angeles barrio high school. He takes a handful of hispanic students and teaches them calculus in preparation for the Advanced Placement test sponsored by the Educational Testing Service. He makes them sign a contract pledging to work long hours and

even weekends to prepare for this test.When all 13 students pass the test, however, the Educational Testing Service cancels the scores and investigates for possible cheating. Escalante makes it clear to the ETS representatives that the issue is racial--they would not accept that poor hispanic students could do so well. Even other teachers at the school seem to believe the ETS, suggesting the students may have been put under so much pressure that they would resort to cheating. An apparent theme is that teachers do not expect minority students to be able to perform such advanced work. The students are forced to retake the test. They all pass again--some with perfect scores.

The 1989 film, "Dead Poets Society," drew positive reviews from movie critics but it received harsh attacks from the academic community. Heilman (1991) summed up his analysis as follows:

> First you've got this guy on a white horse charging in to save the place. So you need some set-up black hats to make him look like a hero instead of a moral egotist. Look at what a monstrous, trite, overstuffed setup you get--a school principal that looks like a travesty of Thomas Arnold. The type hasn't been seen since Dickens. You get a Hitlerish papa who screams orders about his son's career (p. 417).

The teacher, John Keating, played by Robin Williams, is a character strikingly similar to the character of Jean Brodie in "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" (Heilman, 1991). Keating, like Brodie, is the unorthodox nonconformist. He seems to instill a love of poetry in his cult-like following of students, takes his class through a series of unusual activities to teach individuality and he encourages them to "seize the day." Glatthorn (1990), however, accuses the character of being less than nobel and virtuous by pointing out that Keating looks the other way when students break school rules and that he interposes himself in a conflict between a father and a son. The son eventually commits suicide and Keating is accused by school administrators of having contributed to the death because of supposedly having encouraged the young man to go against the will of his father. The incident ultimately costs Keating his job.

Heilman (1991) accuses the film of perpetuating the "great-teacher myth"--that to be a good teacher, the individual must be unorthodox, have a cavalier attitude, and must envision himself or herself as if in a "battle" against an "evil" educational system comprised of conspiring administrators and spineless, poorly prepared teachers. Will (1989) gives a possible insight into the vision shared by the rhetorical community. He calls Keating benevolent, "heroic, but not in the banal manner of the whip cracking, death-defying archeologist (Indiana) Jones. Keating's heroism is in his discipline, the purity of his devotion to his vocation. It is for him, literally a vocatio, a calling."

Reviewing the Fantasies and Myths

The most frequent fantasy type in this review of films has been "good versus evil," in which a teacher is typically pitted against a form of "evil." In the early films, the antagonists came from outside the school, allowing for the creation of the myth of teachers and schools as a haven for liberation and enlightenment. Teachers were the facilitators of this enlightenment; they were benevolent, powerful guardians of truth. Beginning with the film, "Blackboard Jungle," new fantasy myths emerged in the form of themes that focused on teacher incompetence, teacher and administrator disdain for students, and the utter "jungle"-like chaos of violence and disorder that control schools. While the "good versus evil" fantasy type persists as the dominant type, the "good" now typically takes the form of a teacher who must challenge the "evil"--the other teachers and administrators. This is Heilman's (1991) great-teacher myth--to be a great teacher is to be some type of outlaw who must crusade against other teachers and the system. This great teacher in this myth is atypical. They typical teacher is far from competent. And as was seen, many of the "great" teachers--the Keatings, Brodies, Durrells--face pressure to be forced from the system.

This section has explored fantasy types and myths several American movies about teachers and schools. The next section will use the results of public opinion polls to explore the possibility that the rhetorical vision of these movies is shared to some extent by the rhetorical community.

The Public's Perceptions

Criticism of school teachers and public schools is certainly nothing new. In fact, it predates the birth of the American film industry. In 1791, for example, a report from Delaware decried schools as "completely despicable, wretched, and contemptible" and teachers as "shamefully deficient (Kaestle, 1990)." A 1928-1932 study of Pennsylvania teacher education students concluded that teachers have "inferior minds (Koerner, 1963, p. 68)." A 1938 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching report described a study in which a significant percentage of college seniors preparing to become teachers were outperformed by high school seniors on general information and vocabulary tests. The report concluded:

> If we assume that a minimum requirement for teaching ought to be that the teacher knows more than the student, it seems reasonable to ask just who ought to be paid for teaching whom (in Woodring, 1953).

The 1950s and 1960s produced a number of books highly critical of teachers, schools, and the education system of the United States, in general. These books included, "Quackery in the Public Schools" (Lynd, 1953), "The Diminished Mind: A Study of Planned Mediocrity In Our Public Schools" (Smith, 1954), "Let's Talk Sense About Our Schools" (Woodring, 1953), "Educational Wastelands: The Retreat From Learning In Our Public Schools" (Bestor, 1953), and "The Miseducation of American Teachers" (Koerner, 1963). Woodring (1953), for example, wrote that teachers are drawn from the ranks of the lower middle class and that college education majors are "less able" academically than students entering other professional schools and professions. It was in the midst of this environment that films such as "Blackboard Jungle" and "To Sir, With Love" were released.

In 1969, the Gallup organization and Phi Delta Kappa joined forces to conduct the first of what has become an annual national poll of public perceptions of teachers, schools, and school administrators (Elam, 1989). The goal of the poll is to "identify and report national trends in public opinion on questions and issues of interest to education policy makers" and to allow these trends to

be studied in the context of political, social, cultural and economic events (Elam, 1989).

Beginning with the 1969 poll, respondents have been asked each year to name the biggest problem faced by their local schools. The most frequently cited "problem," ranking first in 16 of the first 20 polls, was "discipline" (Elam, 1989). In the most recent polls it has finished second to "drugs." "Difficulty in finding good teachers" has finished in at least the top six in every one of the polls. In 1969, "difficulty in finding good teachers" ranked third behind "discipline" and "poor facilities" (Elam, 1989, 1990). In the mid-1970s, "poor curriculum/standards" began appearing with regular frequency in the top five "problems." From 1982 to 1984, "teachers lack of interest" was ranked sixth behind "difficulty in finding good teachers." And in 1988, "pupils lack of interest" broke into the top six for the first time (Elam, 1989, 1990).

In 1969 respondents were also asked, "Do you think this local public school system has a hard time getting good teachers?" Fifty-two percent of the respondents answered "yes," and 38 percent of the respondents also said "yes" when asked, "Do you think there are some teachers in the local public school system who should be dropped or fired (Elam, 1989)?" When asked why the teachers should be fired, the most frequent answer was "incompetence," followed by "personality problems" (Elam, 1989).

Elam (1989) reports that a second major benchmark question focused on how respondents would rank their local schools and the nation's schools. Beginning in 1974, the survey included the question, "Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and FAIL to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools, themselves, in this community were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here..." In 1981, the question also asked respondents to grade "public schools nationally" (Elam, 1989). In 1974, 32 percent of the respondents gave their local schools a grade of "C" or worse. In 1975, that percentage increased to 44 percent and held steady for the next two years before climbing to 49 percent in 1981 and peaking at 54 percent in 1981. The percentage declined only modestly to 48 percent in 1989 and

then rose to 51 percent in 1990 (Elam, 1990). In 1974, 18 percent of the respondents gave their local schools a grade of "A." That percentage dropped to a low of 6 percent in 1983 and has since increased only to 10 percent in 1990 (Elam, 1989, 1990).

A possible indication of the impact of the myth-making powers of the movies and other mass media is that fact that respondents gave much better grades to their local schools, with which they were more personally familiar, than to the nation's schools, in general. Elam (1989) also notes that parents with children tend to grade their local schools higher than respondents who did not have children in school. In 1981, the first year respondents were asked to grade schools nationally, 64 percent of the respondents gave the nation's schools a "C" or worse. That percentage declined gradually to 57 percent in 1987 and then shot back to 64 percent in 1988 and then up to 69 percent in 1990 (Elam, 1990). Only 2 percent of the respondents gave a grade of "A" in 1981. That percentage rose to 4 percent in 1987 and then fell off to 2 percent in 1990 (Elam, 1990). Elam (1990) notes:

> As past polls have amply demonstrated, people tend to give high grades to their local public schools than they give to public schools nationally. There is a suggestion...of a slow deterioration in the national ratings in recent years. It is tempting to attribute this change to increasingly negative media coverage, but I know of no hard evidence to support such a conclusion....The contrast between ratings given the nation's schools and ratings given local schools by the people who should know them best--parents of children currently attending the schools--is striking and instructive.... The most reasonable explanation for this phenomenon is that the more firsthand knowledge one has about the public schools (i.e., knowledge that doesn't come from the media), the better one likes and respects them (p. 51).

A third benchmark question, appearing on the survey in seven different years, asked parents if they would like to have one of their children take up teaching in the public schools as a career. In 1969, 75 percent of the respondents answered "yes," they would like it if one of their

children become a public school teacher. The percentage fell to 67 percent in 1972, 48 percent in 1980, 46 percent in 1981, and bottomed out at 45 percent in 1983. The percentage had climbed to 58 percent in 1988 and then declined to 51 percent in 1990 (Elam, 1990). Fifteen percent said "no" in 1969 and that percent climbed to 43 percent in 1981, dropped off to 31 percent in 1988, and then climbed to 38 percent in 1990 (Elam, 1990). In the 1990 survey report in the Phi Delta Kappan, Elam (1990) noted:

> The attractiveness of the occupation has fluctuated considerably, related no doubt to changing popular attitudes toward the schools and to impressions about teacher income. Unfortunately, only about half of today's parents (compared with 75 percent in 1969) would like to see one of their children become a public school teacher. Interestingly, college-educated and high-income respondents are as likely as poorly educated and low-income respondents to perceive teaching as a desirable career for their children today (p. 47).

In response to this trend of declining public optimism and favorable opinion, a number of pro-teacher, pro-education media campaigns were launched in the mid- to late-1980s in an effort to improve public opinion. In its current "Invest in America' campaign, the National Education Association uses print and television public service announcements directed at both current and potential teachers (Grasso, 1991). In 1989, Princeton senior Wendy Kopp launched the "Teach for America" program--a teacher corps patterned after the Peace Corps. Teach for America recruits non-education majors, trains them, and then places them in teaching assignments in both urban and rural areas where the need for teachers is the greatest (Thomsen, 1992). In 1988, Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., unveiled its national ongoing media campaign designed to attract new teachers into the profession. Its most prominent feature is the use of its 1-800-45-TEACH number, which appears in all its print and television PSAs. The organization's literature states that one of the goals of the campaign is to raise the esteem of the teaching profession through public service ad campaigns appearing nationally (Recruiting New Teachers, 1991, March 5). According to

published by organization, more than 407,000 individuals had called the 800 number by April 1991 (Harris, 1990; Recruiting New Teachers, 1991, March 5).

An October 1989 Roper report, "A Report Card on Education," described public opinion on public education as "mixed...although it appears to be brightening" (A Report Card..., Oct. 1989). The report noted "Americans believe there has been some improvement in public school education in recent years..." The 1990 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll indicates that the optimism might be premature. In 1988, the poll asked the question, "Would you say that the public schools in this community have improved from, say, five years ago, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?" Nearly a third of the respondents (29 percent) indicated they felt that things had improved. Nineteen percent said things had gotten worse, and 37 percent said things had stayed the same. When the question was asked again in 1990, only 22 percent indicated things had improved and the number of individuals reporting things had gotten worse jumped to 30 percent (Elam, 1990). The report (Elam, 1990) concludes:

> This question is intended to determine whether people believe the current wave of school reform has been successful. Evidently, not many people do....Not only does a sizable group of respondents think that the schools haven't gotten better recently, but they also think that no great improvement is likely to occur with the current decade (p. 55).

Discussion

A number of these benchmark trends indicate that the public perception of schools, teachers, and the teaching profession became increasingly less positive through the early to mid-1980s. In the late 1980s, attitudes improved slightly, but only to decline once again. The myriad of reports critical of education that appeared in the mid-1980s seemed to corroborate the "fantasy myths" of the teacher movies of that period. As confirmed by the opinion surveys, teachers are apparently viewed as uncommitted, ill-prepared and incompetent. The schools themselves are viewed as equally incompetent and suffering from disciplinary problems, crime, drugs, violence

and general student, teacher and administrator apathy. That local schools and teachers are somehow perceived as better than the national average or composite, may be an indication the persistence of the "great-teacher myth"--local teachers, those known personally by the parents, are somehow the crusaders against the system and its problems.

While, as explained by the Gallup report (Elam, 1990), it would be difficult to make a causal link between the fantasy themes of the movies and the parallel trends in public opinion of public toward teachers and public schools, cultivation theory and symbolic convergence theory may offer a potential explication with at least some face validity.

During the course of the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa surveys, respondents were asked about their source of information about their local schools. The local newspaper was typically the most common source, followed by television and radio (Elam, 1989). Although an "other" category was included, there is no specific indication of the impact of movies.

There is, as was previously mentioned in this paper, a growing interest among communication researchers as to the degree to which mass-mediated messages, television in particular, influence a person's construction of reality (Potter & Chang, 1990). This social construction approach has been called the cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner et al., 1977). Functioning as an agency for symbolic socialization, the media's repetitive dramatizations of certain "norms" and "values" cultivate our prevailing outlooks on the world and "makes people perceive as real and normal and right that which fits the established social order" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Gerbner and Gross (1976) describe the television world as "highly informative" and provides viewers with

> a continuous stream of "facts" and impressions about the way of the world, about the constancies and vagaries of human nature, and about the consequences of actions. The premise of realism is a Trojan horse which carries within it a highly selective, synthetic, and purposeful image of the facts of life....
>
> How many of us have ever been in an operating room, a criminal courtroom, a

> police station or jail, a corporate board room, or a movie studio? How much of what we know about diverse spheres of activity, about how various kinds of people work and what they do--how much of our real world has been learned from fictional worlds? To the extent that viewers see television drama--the foreground of a plot or the background of the television world--as naturalistic, they may derive a wealth of incidental "knowledge." (pp. 178-179)

Potter and Chang (1990), in explaining the cultivation hypothesis, wrote that the more an individual is exposed to mass-mediated messages, the more that individual will come to believe that the real world reflects media content. In other words, the constant repetition of negative messages about teachers and teaching in the mass media is capable of contributing to, or reinforcing, what people believe is actually true regarding teachers and the profession (Thomsen, 1992).

Cultivation theory has been applied specifically to television viewing because of the pervasiveness of the medium. But the similarities between symbolic convergence theory and the cultivation hypothesis provide incentive to apply these effects to other media, including films. The implication of fantasy theme analysis, or symbolic convergence theory, is that the dramas, or fantasy myths, of the films become a part of the viewers' rhetorical vision. The concept of rhetorical vision has been described as "a view of how things have been, are, or will be. Rhetorical visions structure our sense of reality in areas that we cannot experience directly, but can only know by symbolic reproduction" (Littlejohn, 1989). In other words, an individual's knowledge, or set of basic assumptions about the world, is influenced and even shaped by the rhetorical vision he or she shares. As the fantasy themes and types are played over and over again, individuals eventually converge on a particular shared image of reality (Bormann, 1972, 1982a; Littlejohn, 1989). As suggested by Bormann (1972, 1982a, 1982b), this theory applies to discourse, text, and mass-mediated messages of all kinds, ranging from television news to movies.

In many ways there is a certain equifinality to these two theories--they essentially arrive at the same conclusion of media affects through only slightly different explications. Both suggest that

the repeated exposure to the myths and themes of the movies on teachers and teaching should eventually influence an individual's perception of schools, teachers, and the reality of school systems. That individuals would rate national schools and teachers worse than those schools and teachers within their personal experience possibly indicates that an external source has influenced their vision of reality. It is the contention of this paper that Hollywood's influence has functioned as Gerbner and Gross' Trojan horse--or as a worm in the apple, to use a metaphor more appropriate in the field of education. It is difficult to measure the size of the effect--whether it is one of reinforcement or cultivation--but the belief that some effect exists has face validity, particularly when the fantasy myths of the films analyzed in this paper parallel so closely the public perceptions found in the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa polls.

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